

UTC News & Views

for safe, reliable, affordable service

Summer 2001

Consumer grants target telephones

The Seattle Foundation has awarded \$2 million in telephone consumer education grants, making it possible for five Washington organizations to provide specialized training and information to targeted consumers.

The grants were established as part of a final settlement to a court case over U S West (now Qwest) phone rates. (See Winter 2001 edition).

Spokane Neighborhood Action Programs has received \$688,000 to lead a statewide collaborative project to provide consumer education to low-income people.

North Central Educational Service District has received \$467,000 to organize a statewide educational outreach effort to adults to help them become more effective consumers.

Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians has received \$460,000 to launch a consumer education resource center, with outreach to the state's tribes.

Senior Services of Seattle-King County has received \$396,000 to target education to vulnerable seniors.

The Small Business Center of Washington has received \$21,000 to develop fax-on-demand information pieces targeted to small business owners.

Steal this Newsletter!

After completing our fifth year of publishing this consumer newsletter, we would like to remind you that any of our articles may be reproduced and reprinted without permission. That's right! Steal from this newsletter.

We want as many Washington consumers as possible to be informed about our issues. We encourage you to share all or part of this newsletter with your friends and associates. You can find more helpful information and receive this newsletter electronically by visiting our website at: www.wutc.wa.gov.

New UTC commissioner appointed

Patrick J. Oshie, a Yakima attorney, was appointed by the Governor to serve as the UTC's third commissioner.

Oshie, 48, is a partner in the firm of Oshie & Spurgin. He replaces Bill Gillis who served on the UTC until last January when he resigned to accept a faculty position with Washington State University.

UTC commissioners serve six-year terms. Marilyn Showalter, chairwoman, and Dick Hemstad currently serve on the three-person board.

Oshie has been a partner in his Yakima law firm since 1991 where he has represented the Yakama Nation and other clients in federal Indian and environmental law issues.

From 1987 to 1989, Oshie served as an assistant Seattle city attorney representing Seattle City Light where he worked on hydroelectric relicensing and other issues.

Oshie worked as an assistant attorney general in Utah from 1984-1987. In that capacity, Oshie served as public counsel before the Utah Public Service Commission on natural gas, electricity and other utility matters.

Oshie graduated from Western Washington in 1977 and received his law degree from the University of Washington in 1980.

Brochure makes for wise move

You're sitting on the porch of your new home waiting for the truck with your furniture to drive up. Waiting . . . and hoping that you made the right choice when you assigned all of your earthly possessions to the care and delivery of a company you've never done business with before.

We cannot ensure that everything will go smoothly with your next move, but our new brochure should go a long way toward getting you there with some peace of mind.

Our Smart Consumer Guide outlines specifically what you should do before, during and after the move. For instance, before considering a potential mover, check for a UTC permit. A permit is required by law for in-state moves and is your assurance that the company will comply with all safety and consumer regulations.

The brochure and accompanying fact sheets also can help you wade through how much damage protection should be purchased. To receive this brochure in the mail, call our toll-free line listed on the back of this newsletter or visit our website.

Email this newsletter

This newsletter can come to your computer in Acrobat Reader (.pdf) format.

Send an email to Tim Sweeney (tsweeney@wutc.wa.gov) to start receiving this newsletter electronically.

CONSUMER NEWS IN BRIEF

Emergency rule gives customers 30-day warning

Competition means there are winners and losers. So what happens if you pick a loser for your phone service? In recent months, the UTC has heard from over a handful of companies who have either closed or are planning to do so in the near future. Concerned that consumers would be left holding a dead phone line from a bankrupt company, the UTC adopted in May an emergency rule that requires companies to notify their customers 30 days prior to shutting off service.

Your utility will pay you to conserve this summer

All three of our regulated electricity service providers are paying their customers to not use their product this summer and fall.

The payment is a credit on your bill based on whether you are able to reduce consumption during a bill period compared to the same period a year before. Puget Sound Energy, for instance, will give customers a 5 cent credit for every kilowatt hour they reduce beyond a 10 percent threshold. Avista will give the same credit beyond a 5 percent threshold. Contact your utility company for more information.

Garbage rates increase as recyclable value declines

Garbage collection rates are creeping up as a result of a decline in the market value of recycled materials. Your garbage bill includes the cost of picking up and processing your recycled cans, bottles and other materials. The greater the value of the recovered materials when sold, the less you have to pay. In recent years, the price of recycled materials has been increasing, which has helped keep your total collection bill lower. Now that the value of recycled materials has declined, your net garbage bill will be a bit higher.

Fees to sustain interstate pipeline safety program

The UTC has adopted fees on pipeline companies to pay for its beefed-up interstate pipeline safety program. Last year, in the wake of the Bellingham explosion, the legislature ordered the UTC to broaden its existing in-state pipeline safety program to include the generally larger pipes that are part of an interstate pipeline system. This year, the legislature authorized the UTC to adopt industry fees to support the program.

Verizon lowers local phone rates

Verizon is lowering most local residential rates and all business rates this summer. Effective July 1, this latest rate reduction completes a series of reductions that have lowered the company's annual revenues by \$30 million.

The rate reductions are the result of the UTC's investigation into GTE's rates and review of the merger of GTE with Bell Atlantic. The merger produced a new name for the company (Verizon) and key reductions in rates for its customers.

The latest reductions establish a uniform rate for residential customers of \$13 per month for unlimited local service and \$7.25 a month for measured local service. Most customers will realize a reduction of up to \$1 a month, while some customers will see their rate rise by up to 25 cents.

Verizon is eliminating surcharges on business and residential customers for expanded local calling areas. Over the years, when local calling areas have expanded, surcharges have been applied. Starting July 1, these surcharges go away while the larger local calling area for customers will continue.

Verizon also will expand the availability of its optional lower priced basic measured service. With this service, customers pay a lower flat monthly rate and are charged 1.5 cents per minute for all local calls.

Business rates, which were reduced (for most customers) and made uniform earlier, will drop another 30 cents to \$29.70 per month.

In a separate move but also effective July 1, Verizon's \$2.25 monthly charge for directory listings and unlisted numbers dropped to 55 cents while its directory assistance charge went from 25 cents to 55 cents. Residential customers get two free directory assistance requests per month. Business customers get one free directory assistance request per month.

**Stumped by
pay phones?**

Free wallet information card
1-888-437-0565
www.wutc.wa.gov
Washington Utilities & Transportation
Commission

Qwest operator-calls increase

The cost of using a Qwest operator has gone up.

Directory assistance requests are now \$1.25. Residential customers still receive one free directory assistance request per month. Other sources of this information include competing directory assistance providers, your phone book and the Internet. If you do not have a phone book, you may request one from your local phone service provider.

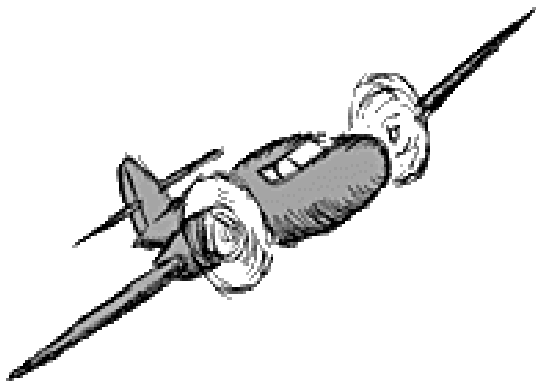
Calls made using Qwest calling cards when the customer does all the dialing are now \$4.99—up from 80 cents per call. Calls where the operator does some of the dialing are now \$5.50 per call.

Qwest toll customers who make a collect call or bill the call to another number will pay \$4.95 (up from \$2.25) if the customer does the dialing. The charge is \$5.50 if the operator dials.

A person-to-person call (where the caller specifies whom they want to talk to or agrees to speak to someone else) is \$9.48 (up from \$4.90). If the operator dials the number for you, the rate is \$9.99.

Qwest is able to change rates for these services on 10-days notice to the UTC and its customers because the services are considered competitive. This means you have the right and ability to select a different toll provider.

For more information about how to be a better telephone consumer, call our toll-free publications request line and ask for a Telephone Consumer Survival Kit.



Taking flight this summer?

Plan ahead when calling home

“A Spokane couple’s one-minute local collect call from a phone booth cost them \$19.”

With the travel season upon us, we would like you to be prepared whenever you have to make a call from an unfamiliar pay phone or hotel room phone.

Telephone deregulation has allowed pay phones and hotels to charge more than the going rate for long-distance and operator-assisted calls. Even local calls made from these types of phones may be more than what you are used to paying.

While not all pay phones and hotels apply exorbitant charges, enough do to justify being careful when using a phone away from home.

For instance, a Vancouver, Wash. woman recently made a four-minute toll call to Portland from a pay phone and was billed \$20.65. A Spokane couple’s one-minute local collect call from a phone booth cost them \$19.

They could have avoided these high charges if they had followed some simple steps: Take a moment to read the disclosure information on the phone, listen for the opportunity to request a rate quote and be prepared to use another provider if necessary.

As the state agency responsible for regulating telephone companies, the WUTC last year heard from over 1,000

people who contacted the agency with pay phone problems.

We have compiled this vast consumer experience into a fact sheet and easy-to-carry wallet card. The card tells you what you need to know when you need it, including how to “dial around” to your preferred long-distance carrier.

“Customers need to be wary when using a pay phone,” urges Chairwoman Marilyn Showalter. “We no longer regulate their rates but the companies are required to disclose their charges to you before you place your call.

She adds that everyone, even if you own a wireless phone, should become acquainted with the information on the card and “be prepared to make another choice if necessary.”

“A little preparation goes a long way,” advises Commissioner Dick Hemstad. “Simply by knowing how to get rate information and to dial around to a preferred phone company, you can avoid the shock of a high bill later.”

The WUTC will send out a fact sheet and as many wallet cards as you request for free. To order, call toll-free 1-888-437-0565 or visit the agency’s website at: www.wutc.wa.gov.

International calls take a bit more effort

If you're thinking of calling home while visiting another country, prepare ahead of time. Call your preferred carrier to determine the rates you will be paying and the process you will need to follow to keep your international long-distance calling costs as low as possible.

This may require knowing a special number that allows you to reach an operator in the United States who can complete the call—a nice feature particularly if you are traveling in a country where you are not proficient in the language.

You might consider using a pre-paid phone card. If you buy your pre-paid card in the U.S., shop carefully to make sure it will work in the countries where you will be traveling. Per-call surcharges and higher charges for the first minute may apply. Review the rate information before buying the card.

If you're stuck at home waiting for your world traveler to call you, ask for the rate before accepting a collect call. You might lose your desire to talk if you realize a one-minute call costs \$32.

If you have questions about the charges for international calls on your bill, contact the phone company at the number listed on your bill. If you're not satisfied with the representative's response, ask to speak with a supervisor.

Do a home audit before you go

You can save a little money on your energy bill while on vacation and make your home safer by conducting your own personal vacation audit.

Start with your water heater. Why keep a tank of water hot if no one is there to use it? For summer vacations, simply turn the heater or breaker switch off. During the winter, turn the water heater to its lowest setting. Some water heaters even have a "vacation" setting.

Check all your faucets, inside and out, to ensure they are turned off. Many recommend turning off the water to your washing machine so as to not risk a damaging water leak while gone.

Check your house for unnecessary appliances that consume energy. Televisions, VCRs and some stereo systems consume a small amount of electricity even when not in use. Pull the plug! Definitely unplug any space heaters and devices that might pose a safety hazard.

See if you can turn off a freezer or refrigerator. If you have more than one fridge, see if you can consolidate into one and turn the other off.

During the summer, turn off your air conditioning and fans. In the winter, turn down your heat. If you have a pool, spa or hot tub, you will definitely want to consider turning the heat down or off on those systems.

Put timers on essential lights so they will turn off during the day. With multiple timers you can arrange to turn a radio and lights on and off to create a more lived in appearance.

How do you prepare your home for vacation?

Send your ideas to UTC News&Views

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What about those time of day power rates



This spring, consumers contacted us about Puget Sound Energy's (PSE) proposal to charge for electricity based on when it is consumed. After some major modifications, the UTC approved this program for approximately 300,000 residential customers on a trial basis. Here are some frequently asked questions about the program.

Why base rates on time of use?

PSE believes it can operate more efficiently if customers reduce consumption during peak demand time periods. Time-of-use rates offer an economic incentive for customers to shift use from peak hours to mid-day and off-peak hours.

How do I know I'm in the program?

If you are in the program, you should have received a letter detailing the program and how to opt out.

What are the time of use rates?

There are three time blocks: peak, mid-day and off-peak hours. The mid-day (10 a.m. to 5 p.m.) rate is the same as it was before the program began. Peak rate (6 a.m. to 10 a.m. & 5 p.m. to 9 p.m.) is an extra .9 cent per kilowatt hour. Off-peak (9 p.m. to 6 a.m. and all day Sunday and holidays) power is the cheapest at .65 cent less per kilowatt hour than mid-day.

The "average" residential customer should experience no change in their total bill. But if, for example, you succeed in shifting 100 kilowatt hours to the off-peak time, you will save roughly 65 cents.

Why am I in the program?

You are included in the program by virtue of the new meter that PSE installed on your home. To get out of the program and return to the normal flat rate, call the company (1-888-225-5775 option 2).

Why am I not in the program?

The program only applies to residential customers with the new "Smart Meters." Your home either does not have one of these meters or your new meter was installed too late to include you in this initial program.

Will my bill go up?

The original proposal caused concern from customers who feared their bills would increase. To alleviate those concerns, the company reduced the difference between the peak and off-peak rates--reducing the financial risk. Customers can also choose to opt out of the program.

How can I shift my energy use?

The company suggests running your dishwasher at bedtime rather than right after dinner. Other recommendations include doing the bulk of your laundry on Sundays and installing a timer on your home's water heater to heat your morning shower with "off-peak" electricity.

What will happen next?

The current program ends Sept. 30. PSE has indicated an interest in extending and broadening the program after the trial period is over. This fall, the UTC will review the results of the pilot and customer comments before passing judgment on any proposed expansion of the program.

For more on PSE's program, visit the company's website at: www.pse.com.

Water saving landscaping ideas

“Many people have the wrong idea about xeriscaping”

“Native plants are adapted to growing in your region’s soils and climate”

Much of our state, even the rainy western region, can be quite dry during the summer months. Add a drought to the mix and suddenly many homeowners look for ways to maintain an attractive landscape and use less water at the same time.

Here are some great sources of practical information for having beautiful gardens and landscapes that don’t require a lot of water.

Xeriscaping is a method of landscaping that promotes water conservation. The word ‘xeriscape’ was coined by a Denver Water Department task force in 1981. It means ‘dry landscape’. But dry does not mean boring.

In fact, many people have the wrong idea about xeriscaping. It is not ugly, brown rocks and cactus. It is not a specific “look” or a limited group of plants, but is a combination of seven basic landscaping principles. A properly designed xeriscape is lush, colorful, and easy to maintain.

Not convinced? See the Denver Water Department’s xeriscaping website for great ‘before and after’ color photos of xeriscaped gardens, as well as a ‘xeriscape of the week’ featured every week June through August. (www.denverwater.org/conservation/xeriscape/xeriscape.html)

You can find more information on xeriscaping at your local library. Here are some suggestions:

* **The Dry Garden** by Beth Chatto (Sagapress, 1996)

* **Water: A Practical Guide to Using**

and Conserving Water in the Garden, by Susan McLure (Workman Publishing, 2000)

* **Waterwise Gardening**, by the editors of Sunset books and Sunset Magazine (Lane Publishing, 1989)

* **WATERWISE GARDENING: AMERICA’S BACKYARD REVOLUTION**, by Thomas Christopher (Simon & Schuster, 1994)

* **XERISCAPE HANDBOOK: A HOW-TO GUIDE TO NATURAL RESOURCE-WISE GARDENING**, by Gayle Weinstein (Fulcrum Pub., 1999)

* **XERISCAPE PLANT GUIDE and XERISCAPE COLOR GUIDE**, by the Denver Water Department (Fulcrum Publishing, 1996 and 1998 respectively)

Washington State University Cooperative Extension, with programs in every county, offer localized suggestions and ideas for using water wisely in the garden.

Their ‘Native Plants’ projects and demonstration gardens show you how native plants are adapted to growing in your region’s soils and climate and require less maintenance (such as watering) than do non-natives.

The Cooperative Extension program also offers brochures such as Water Conservation in Gardens and Landscapes. Get a copy from your local cooperative extension agent or view this information on the “Drought Alert” website <http://drought.wsu.edu/pubs.html>.

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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

In This Issue

Find out what's happening to your phone rates, prepare yourself for calling home while on vacation, get your questions answered about Puget's time-of-use program, learn about xeriscaping and meet our new commissioner-- all inside this edition of UTC News & Views

Ways to save money and avoid problems. . .

Free Consumer Brochures

Guide to UTC Consumer Services
Guide to Utility Services
Guide to Garbage and Recycling Service
Guide to Household Movers (New & Improved)

Free Fact Sheets

Choosing Local Long Distance Service
Local Phone Service Competition
Prepaid Calling Cards
Curbside Recycling
Tips on Pay Phone Use (includes wallet card)
Phone Solicitation: Protecting your Privacy

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